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ABSTRACT

This brief review of principles of inclusive educational practices for students with disabilities explains what inclusion is, identifies characteristics of inclusive schools, considers preparation for inclusive schooling, and addresses inclusion policy. Inclusion is seen as reflecting the intent of federal law that children with disabilities be educated with their nondisabled peers in the least restrictive environment. Characteristics of inclusive schools include: (1) a sense of community; (2) a common vision; (3) problem solving teams; (4) parents, teachers, paraprofessionals, and community members as partners; (5) students as problem solvers; (6) use of a common language; (7) time for planning; (8) bringing services to the student; (9) flexible scheduling; and (10) co-teaching. Communities committed to implementing inclusive schools should focus on staff development, informing parents, and flexibility in learning environments. The consensus among key associations and councils is supportive of inclusion but stresses the necessity for the provision of appropriate support services. (Contains 16 references.) (DB)

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Research Review for Inclusive Practices

by Rita Hocog Inos and Mary Anne Quigley

What Is Inclusion?

Inclusion, defined clearly and succinctly by Webster, is simply "including all." The practice of inclusion, however, is complex and requires significant change in the attitudes and beliefs of everyone involved. Incorporating diverse people into a truly inclusive community requires vision, commitment, and the belief that each and every individual has a significant contribution to make. There are many instances where families, communities, schools, businesses, and even some governments are accomplishing inclusiveness through their own beliefs that it is the most effective and successful mode of operation and the natural way of life.

Inclusive education is viewed nationwide as a critical component of the overall general education reform. School systems are restructuring their educational programs to achieve optimal results for increasingly diverse students with highly complex learning needs, including students with varied ethnic, linguistic, socioeconomic and ability components. Many of these reform efforts are comprised of strategies at the school-based level to consolidate special education, bilingual, homeless, minority, mental health, and other support programs with general education, thereby enhancing service to all students and families in their communities. The term inclusive schools is generally used to describe changes that are occurring within schools and school districts to coordinate and unify educational programs and services and to transform schools into places where all children, including those with diverse abilities and needs, belong and can learn at high functioning levels.

It is not within the scope of this synthesis to document disagreement among professionals, parents and other players concerning the appropriateness of inclusion, or its effectiveness. Debate on these matters has become a moot point as constitutionally based court findings have set precedents for the rights of all students to be educated in regular classes. Three federal laws that protect individuals with disabilities and ensure their rights to educational opportunities with nondisabled peers are: (1) Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, (2) the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Part B (IDEA), and (3) the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA). Common descriptions in these laws of "least restrictive environment," "most integrated setting appropriate," and "not separate or different" relate to the constitutional principles of the guaranteed equal protection of the law and not being deprived of life, liberty or property without due process of the law. Inclusion reflects the intent of the law that children with disabilities be educated with their nondisabled peers to the greatest extent possible or appropriate. These laws set the precedent for all students, not just those with disabilities, to have the opportunity to be educated equally with their peers and disallow any child from being excluded, no matter how diverse from the general population the child may be. Inclusion differs from mainstreaming, which refers to the practice of placing special needs (bilin-

Not every child has an equal talent or an equal ability or equal motivation, but children have the equal right to develop their talent, their ability and their motivation.

- John Fitzgerald Kennedy

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gual, speech, mental health, physical health) students, housed in special education classes, in general education classes for part of the school day, usually in nonacademic settings.

IDEA mandates that school districts place students with disabilities in the "least restrictive environment appropriate" and offer these students "a continuum of alternative placements." Several recent court cases set the precedent for schools to make a more than significant effort to find inclusive solutions for every child. Federal courts have interpreted these rules to require that even children with severe needs be included in classrooms they would otherwise attend if not disabled, even if these children are not able to accomplish the academic work. This requirement is enforced as long as: (1) there is a potential social benefit, (2) the class might stimulate the child's linguistic development, or (3) the other students could provide appropriate role models for the student. These laws, which have been enacted specifically to protect the rights of children with disabilities from being excluded from the benefits of the regular classroom hold ramifications for all students, regardless of their needs and abilities, to also be ensured of those rights.

Commensurate with the recent litigation and present climate of educational reform, school districts across the nation are focusing on the full implementation of the least restrictive environment regulation. An effective inclusive school may be defined as a diverse problem-solving organization with a common mission that emphasizes learning for all students. Teachers and other school staff members are committed to work together in creating and maintaining a climate conducive to learning and to share the responsibility for all students. An inclusive school has a shared value that promotes a single, coordinated system of education dedicated to ensuring that all students are empowered to become caring, competent and contributing citizens in an integrated, changing and diverse society.

Build for your team a feeling of oneness, of dependence on one another and of strength to be derived by unity.

- Vince Lombardi

The least restrictive environment for many students with special needs will be the regular education classroom with appropriate supplementary aids and services and curriculum adaptations. For other disabled students, the least restrictive environment that may help them reach educational goals may be part- or full-time education in special classes, support programs, or schools. Meeting the unique and diverse educational needs of all students is the goal of any inclusive movement. This goal presents an unprecedented challenge in educational history.

Inclusive School Characteristics

Educational change, no matter how lofty the goals, will only take place over time and by enlightened, informed people as they truly become committed to a shared vision. Inclusive schools are developing in a unique way based on the needs of their individual students and communities. All inclusive schools, however, have several common features that characterize their success:

Creative thinking may mean simply the realization that there is no particular virtue in doing things the way they have always been done.

- Rudolphy Flesch

1. ***A Sense of Community*** - An inclusive school is a school where every child is respected as part of the school community, and where each child is encouraged to learn and achieve as much as possible. In order to achieve that sense of belonging for each child, many schools have found that fostering a sense of community is of primary importance.

2. ***A Common Vision*** - A shared vision that sees each child as a respected member of the community brings a common goal and connectedness to every participant—parent, administrator, school staff, or student. Sharing a common vision produces a strong community sense and interconnectedness.

3. ***Problem Solving Teams*** - Teams comprised of significant participants in every child's program are formed to make decisions concerning how a student's individual needs

may be met. Problem-solving teams determine the type and extent of special education adaptations and services needed for each child and develop the implementation plan for inclusive policies for each child. In this way, each child benefits from the expertise of many members of the school community, each of whom provides a specific perspective on the individual needs of that child. Typically, teams consist of principal, special education teacher, regular education teacher, counselor, parent, paraprofessional and specific resource people.

4. ***Parents as Partners*** - A significant addition observed in inclusive schools is the solid inclusion of parents as full members of the school team. Recognizing the valid perspective of parents, addressing their concerns and dreams for their child, and incorporating their wishes into the educational plan are all aspects of a successful problem-solving team.

5. ***Teachers as Partners*** - Teachers are finding increased collegiality and a reduction in the sense of isolation through partnering as co-teachers. Teaming by regular education and special education teachers provides classes with the expertise of not just one, but two teachers. In these situations, teachers learn from each other, gaining inspiration and finding solutions to problems they had difficulty solving alone.

6. ***Paraprofessionals as Partners*** - Paraprofessionals play an equally significant role by providing continuity and support for students, staff, and families. Insightful perspective in planning and consistent service delivery are two of the vital parts paraprofessionals play on the problem-solving team.

7. ***Students as Problem Solvers*** - Successful inclusive schools involve students as partners in the school community. As students are allowed a greater participation in the community, they become more responsible and effective in the inclusive process. Common among inclusive schools is the use of students as:

   a. peer mediators - students trained to help resolve disputes among other students.
   b. peer tutoring - students help other students learn and review material.
   c. cross-age tutoring - older students helping younger students.
   d. cooperative learning - teams of students problem solving and working together.
   e. buddy systems - two children who agree to help each other; may be made up of any two children, regardless of educational status, who want to help each other.

8. ***Community Members as Partners*** - Community involvement has been increased through the use of volunteers to mentor students, provide tutoring and support, and support staff in varied and unique ways that enhance the diversity of the student body.

9. ***Using a Common Language*** - A sense of community is created by establishing a common language without the use of intellectual and confusing terms, so that all participants can equally understand.

10. ***Time for Planning*** - Inclusive practices require additional planning time and scheduling for collaboration. For inclusion to be effective, the increased time for planning must play a significant role.

11. ***Bringing Services to the Student*** - Considerable success is being experienced by schools that provide services in the classroom for children with special needs. Regular teachers are exposed to the specialized techniques resource teachers employ, and students do not miss general instruction or disrupt the cohesiveness of the class.

12. ***Flexible Scheduling*** - A major challenge is how to manage instructional time in the most efficient way, not only to teach the curriculum but also to build a sense of community. Each successful inclusive school devised various methods to increase flexibility to meet the diverse needs of the school population.

13. ***Co-Teaching*** - All teaching partnerships require collaboration, compromise, and extensive communication. General education and special education teachers bring knowledge and skills to teaching. When paired together, these teachers pool their expertise. Generally, regular teachers have in-depth knowledge concerning specific curriculum or subject area, whereas special education teachers know how to modify and break down curriculum and how to adapt methodologies to meet the needs of individual children. When general education and special education teachers are placed in a situation where they can work together, they have more to offer the students and each other.

Inclusive School Preparation

Once a community has arrived at a shared vision to provide all students with the necessary opportunities and supports that will allow them to become independent, productive, and socially involved students who are committed to lifelong learning, staff must determine the role and responsibilities of individual teachers, support personnel, and administrators. In an inclusive environment, it is necessary to identify for each student:

I have learned that we all share the same dream...of being valued members of society with an equal chance of success.

- Judy Heuman

- Who will provide the services needed?
- How will the services be provided?
- When will the services be provided?
- Where will the services be provided?

Staff Development - Programs that promote the professional development of teachers must be ongoing and well planned. Training must address the needs of the school community and incorporate effective interventions that will support the needs of individual students. Staff development may address multisensory instruction, learning differences, study-skills instruction, social-skills instruction, co-teaching or the use of collaboration and cooperative learning. Training will be directed to creating supportive networks and necessary skill building to address the specific needs of students. When staff is highly trained and sensitive to the needs of all children, many problems never surface, because they are solved in the general ongoing structure of the day.

To wish to progress is the largest part of progress.

- Seneca, 1st Century

Informed Parents - Parents are vital stakeholders in the process. They will ask questions that must be addressed and teams should be prepared to answer, such as:

- Will my child learn as well?
- What level of involvement will I have in decisions regarding my child's educational needs and placement?
- Will school staff be trained to meet my child's needs?
- Will flexibility for my child be assured?
- Will support systems, including related services, be available to meet my child's needs?

Flexibility - Flexibility in the learning environment is essential. Placement decisions must be based on the specific needs of the student, as identified in the student's individualized education program. A continuum of alternative placement options needs to be available to each student. Flexibility allows parents, school staff and the student to make decisions based on educational needs. There is no one environment, be it regular or special education classroom, that will always meet the unique and specific needs of all students. If a placement does not work successfully,

changes must be made before failure becomes a pattern. The system must be flexible enough to allow for responsible inclusion that incorporates the availability of a continuum of alternative placement options. This flexibility in programming and meeting needs as they emerge becomes highly effective when applied to each and every student in the school community.

Inclusion Policy

Consensus among the key Associations and Councils[1] supports inclusion for the majority of students while simultaneously enriching the classroom experience of all students. However, that support comes only with the stipulation that extensive teacher training, additional classroom aides (when necessary), the purchase of classroom technology, additional planning time, class size that is responsive to student needs, and a continuum of alternative placements be provided. Placement and service must be determined for each student by a team that includes all stakeholders and must be specified in the individualized education program. The general Association definition of successful inclusion reflects society's commitment that every child be educated in the environment that is most appropriate to the child's identified needs. Inclusion is education that provides access to appropriate support and remediation at every level to facilitate each child's ability to participate and achieve. The environment in which these services can best be delivered depends on the needs of the individual student.

The classroom, not the trench, is the frontier of freedom, now and forevermore.

- Lyndon Baines Johnson

Conclusion

Cultural and ethnic diversity within the classroom is a natural reflection of the expanding fabric of American culture. This, along with the restructuring movement that incorporates all students, regardless of diversity, into the regular classroom, creates unique challenges for schools. The creation of inclusive schools where every child is encouraged to learn and achieve requires new thinking about how children learn, how teachers teach, and how schools are organized and administered. Litigation, parental pressure, teacher innovation, and unique and diverse student educational needs have all combined to create a climate of change and innovation that heralds bold vision, brave steps, and the forging of schools that could only be dreamed of in the past.

Problems are complex and monumental, but not insurmountable. Throughout the nation, many schools are moving forward on a continuum of excellence and creating educational systems that respond to the diverse learning needs of all their students. These inclusive schools are providing all of their students with opportunities and supports that will allow them to become independent, productive, and socially involved citizens who are committed to lifelong learning. These schools provide inspiration and hope for educational systems and are harbingers of a brighter future for all children.

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